



Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa (*center left*) and U.S. Ambassador to Ecuador Michael Fitzpatrick shake hands during a ceremony welcoming the arrival of a C-130H Hercules aircraft to the Ecuadorian Air Force in Latacunga, Ecuador, 25 March 2024. The ceremony marked a new milestone in Ecuador's participation in the National Guard Bureau State Partnership Program, which has paired Ecuador and the Kentucky National Guard for mutual military cooperation. The author argues that a U.S. air base in Ecuador would enable the United States to conduct surveillance missions and intelligence-gathering operations more effectively, bolstering its ability to monitor illicit activities that threaten Ecuadorian and regional security. (Photo by Phil Speck, U.S. Air National Guard)

A U.S. Air Base in Ecuador

Strategic and Security Benefits for the U.S.-Ecuador Relationship

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Establishing a U.S. air base in Ecuador would significantly enhance U.S. strategic reach in South America, providing a critical foothold for military operations and regional stability initiatives. Geographically positioned along the Pacific coast, Ecuador offers proximity to key maritime and aerial routes, facilitating rapid response capabilities to various security challenges including drug trafficking, organized crime, and humanitarian crises.¹ An air base would enable the United States to conduct surveillance missions and intelligence-gathering operations more effectively, bolstering its ability to monitor illicit activities that threaten Ecuadorian and regional security.² Such a presence would deter potential adversaries by signaling U.S. commitment to maintaining stability in a region increasingly influenced by nontraditional powers, particularly China and Russia.

A U.S. air base in Ecuador would advance the military capabilities of the United States in South America while providing mutual benefits for Ecuador including increased economic assistance, infrastructure development, and enhanced national security. This article argues that a base would not only act as a deterrent against external influences, particularly from China and Russia, but it would also strengthen U.S.-Ecuador relations through cooperative efforts to address regional security challenges like drug trafficking and organized crime. This point is framed within a historical context, drawing parallels to previous U.S. security operations in the region including the U.S. military presence in the Galapagos that started during World War II and the ten-year agreement on the forward operating location (FOL) in Manta (1999–2009).³

Having the hard power of a U.S. base in Ecuador enhances strategic capabilities and benefits both nations. The partnership would foster deeper diplomatic ties and encourage collaboration on various issues from counternarcotics efforts to environmental protection initiatives. A U.S. base could facilitate joint exercises and information-sharing, enhancing Ecuador's ability to respond to regional challenges while promoting stability and security. Establishing a U.S. air base in Ecuador would solidify the United States' strategic position in South America and advance Ecuador's national interests, creating a framework for enhanced cooperation and mutual benefit in addressing the region's complex security landscape.

Forward Operating Location at Eloy Alfaro Air Base, Manta, 1999

The FOL represented a significant development in U.S. military strategy within counternarcotics operations in Latin America. Situated on Eloy Alfaro Air Base in Manta, Ecuador, the FOL was designed to enhance U.S. capabilities in monitoring and interdiction of drug trafficking routes, particularly those linked to Colombian cocaine production. The FOL was established through a bilateral agreement between the United States and Ecuador that sought to bolster regional security through enhanced military cooperation.⁴ This agreement allowed for a ten-year lease of the facility and was characterized by operational enhancements including reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft deployment, which facilitated intelligence gathering and operational support for antidrug efforts throughout the Andean region.

The leasing agreement was renewed in 2008 when the two nations discussed extending the presence of U.S. forces at the air base. However, the geopolitical landscape shifted significantly following the election of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, who opposed foreign military installations, reevaluated the terms, and terminated the U.S. military presence in the country.⁵ The FOL at Eloy Alfaro was officially closed in 2009, marking the end of a strategic partnership integral to U.S. counternarcotics efforts in the region. The closure reflects the complexities of international military agreements, influenced by domestic political changes and shifting priorities within the broader context of U.S.-Latin American relations. The legacy of the FOL continues to inform discussions about military presence and regional security dynamics in Ecuador and beyond.

Unit Composition, Missions, and Operating Authorities

The operational authority of U.S. forces at the former FOL in Manta was primarily derived from a 1999 bilateral agreement with the Ecuadorian government. This agreement, rather than a formal treaty, outlined the scope of U.S. activities, focusing mainly on aerial surveillance and intelligence gathering to support counternarcotics operations. It explicitly authorized the deployment of U.S. military personnel and assets such as surveillance aircraft to monitor and track illicit drug trafficking in

the eastern Pacific. Notably, the agreement stipulated limitations, reserving interdiction operations within Ecuadorian territorial boundaries for Ecuadorian authorities, thus defining clear operational responsibilities.⁶

Complementary to the bilateral agreement, the legal framework governing U.S. military conduct was established by Title 10 of the U.S. Code.⁷ This legislation provides the foundational authority for the organization, functions, and operations of the U.S. Department of Defense and its branches. In the context of the Manta FOL, Title 10 authorized the deployment and conduct of U.S. military personnel, ensuring that activities remained within a legally defined scope. Although not explicitly covered in the context, implementing status of forces agreements (SOFA) could have further refined U.S. forces' legal standing and operational parameters within Ecuadorian territory, enhancing clarity around jurisdictional issues.

The operational focus of the U.S. presence was centered on counternarcotics efforts, reflecting the strategic importance of the region in combating transnational drug trafficking. The deployment of assets such as AWACS E-3 and P-3 Orion aircraft enabled comprehensive surveillance capabilities, facilitating the detection and tracking of air and maritime traffic associated with illicit activities.⁸ Information collected was disseminated to the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South) for analysis and action, illustrating a collaborative approach to regional security. Termination of the bilateral agreement in 2009 by the Ecuadorian government marked the end of U.S. military operations at the Manta FOL, underscoring the contingent nature of international security cooperation and the significance of bilateral agreements in defining operational parameters. The legacy of the Manta FOL serves as a case study in the complexities of military deployments in support of counternarcotics missions, highlighting the interplay among national sovereignty, international agreements, and strategic security objectives.

Before and Now: SOFA Agreement Between Ecuador and the United States

The operational dynamics of the U.S. presence at the former Manta air base in Ecuador were primarily governed by a bilateral agreement focused on counternarcotics operations rather than a comprehensive

SOFA.⁹ This distinction is significant because, while the bilateral agreement outlined the operational parameters for U.S. activities, it lacked the detailed legal framework typically provided by a SOFA regarding U.S. personnel's jurisdictional and legal standing. The absence of such a framework led to complexities and friction concerning the legal treatment of U.S. personnel within Ecuadorian territory. As a result, despite facilitating collaborative counternarcotics efforts, the operational environment was marked by an unclear legal framework that would have offered greater clarity and security for U.S. forces.

In contrast, the recent ratification of a SOFA between the United States and Ecuador in 2024 signifies a shift toward a more formalized and legally robust security partnership.¹⁰ This new agreement addresses the legal ambiguities that characterized the previous operational context, providing a clear legal framework for U.S. personnel and activities within Ecuador. The ratification of this SOFA reflects the evolving security landscape in Ecuador, which has been marked by increased instability and drug trafficking, thereby underscoring the strategic importance of a strengthened U.S.-Ecuadorian security relationship. This formalization of legal standings aims to streamline cooperation, enhance operational efficiency, and ensure greater legal certainty for U.S. personnel engaged in security cooperation efforts within Ecuador.

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Members of the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) teach Ecuadorian partner forces how to properly prepare a linear charge to breach a door in Manta, Ecuador, 16 May 2022. Joint combined exchange training like this can enhance security cooperation between the two countries. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Matthew Griffith, U.S. Army)

The Political Dynamics that Influenced U.S. Presence

In 2014, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa took decisive steps to reduce the presence of the U.S. Department of Defense at the U.S. embassy in Quito by closing the Security Cooperation Office. This move was part of a broader effort to assert Ecuador's sovereignty and minimize foreign military influence, reflecting a significant shift in the country's foreign policy toward greater independence from U.S. military involvement.¹¹ Correa's administration aimed to strengthen relations with other nations and foster a more autonomous approach to security and defense matters.

Correa raised concerns about what he viewed as an excessive number of U.S. military personnel in Ecuador. He noted the approximately fifty military officers and questioned the justification for their presence. His administration requested the departure of all U.S. military members associated with the Security

Cooperation Office.¹² However, this order did not apply to those assigned to the U.S. military attaché's office. This action exemplified Correa's broader strategy to reinforce Ecuadorian sovereignty and reduce the influence of foreign military forces within the country. Although the political dynamic of Correa's time is no longer applicable, it could return. The U.S.-Ecuador relationship requires the strengthening and resiliency of a new agreement for an air base by lengthening the duration of a formal lease and establishing additional conditions that guarantee the partnership regardless of who the president is.

Ecuador's Arms Imports from China and the United States

The shift in Ecuador's arms imports, particularly the notable increase from China around 2010, can be understood within the broader context of geopolitical and economic transformations during Correa's

presidency (2007–2017).¹³ Under Correa, Ecuador adopted a more independent foreign policy emphasizing diversifying its international partnerships, especially with non-Western powers. This strategic pivot aimed to reduce the country's reliance on traditional allies, notably the United States, while fostering closer ties with China. By pursuing this approach, the Correa administration sought to leverage China's growing economic and political influence in Latin America, positioning Ecuador to benefit from increased investment and cooperation in various sectors, including defense.¹⁴

Substantial loans from Chinese banks facilitated China's expanding role in Ecuador's military procurement, often contingent upon agreements to purchase Chinese goods and services, including military equipment. This shift contributed to Ecuador's efforts to diversify its arms sources and move away from its historical dependence on U.S. military supplies. Among the key acquisitions were Chinese radar systems and other military technologies integral to enhancing Ecuador's defense capabilities. Furthermore, constructing the ECU-911 national emergency response system, equipped with public surveillance capabilities and built by a Chinese company, exemplified the deepening military and technological cooperation between Ecuador and China.¹⁵

Ecuador's defense relationship with China has experienced fluctuations, characterized by significant challenges concerning the functionality and integration of military equipment. A notable example occurred when Ecuador terminated a \$60 million contract for Chinese radar systems after the devices failed to function, which led to a subsequent lawsuit.¹⁶ Even with challenges, the shift in Ecuador's arms imports underscores a significant realignment in regional power dynamics. It reflects Ecuador's aspirations for a more autonomous foreign policy as the nation navigates the complexities of its evolving relationships with global powers.

Security Cooperation and Drug Trafficking

Ecuador has historically faced significant challenges as a narcotics transit route, primarily due to its strategic geographical location between two major cocaine-producing countries—Colombia and Peru. The country's porous borders and insufficient enforcement capabilities have facilitated the movement of illicit drugs,

making it an attractive corridor for traffickers aiming to reach markets in the United States and Europe.¹⁷ The absence of robust institutional frameworks and resources to combat drug trafficking has exacerbated this issue, allowing organized crime to flourish and leading to increased violence and corruption within Ecuadorian society.

The lack of effective surveillance and law enforcement mechanisms has hindered the government's ability to address the multifaceted challenges posed by transnational drug trafficking networks. This has resulted in the Ecuadorian army's current involvement in internal security missions.¹⁸ The army's mandate has expanded to include aspects of internal security in the country.

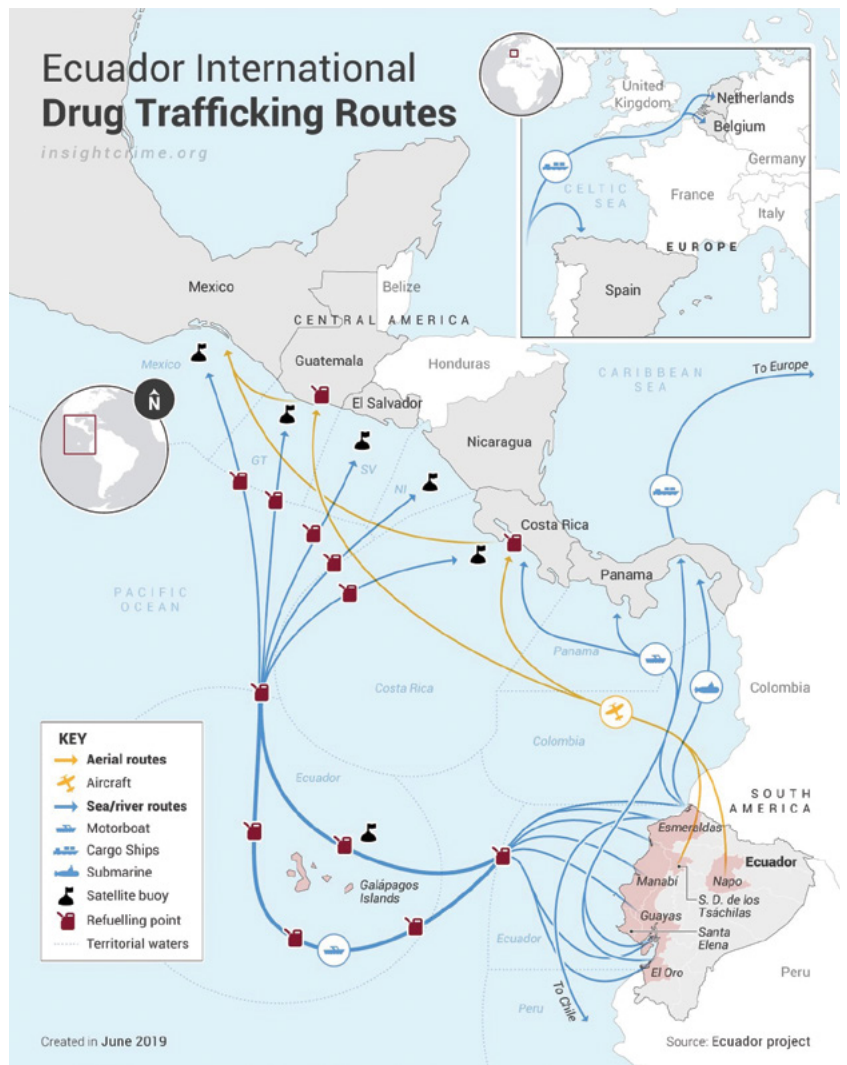
Before the U.S. base: Challenges faced by Ecuador as a narcotics transit route. Before the establishment of the U.S. FOL in Manta, Ecuador's struggles with narcotics trafficking were compounded by a growing domestic drug abuse problem. The rising demand for narcotics within the country coupled with inadequate treatment facilities for substance use disorders created a public health crisis that further complicated efforts to combat drug trafficking.¹⁹ Additionally, the influence of powerful drug cartels operating in neighboring countries intensified the challenges faced by Ecuador, as these organizations sought to exploit the country's vulnerabilities for their operations. Overall, the combination of Ecuador's geographical position, weak institutional responses, and increasing domestic drug issues established a complex environment that necessitated international cooperation and support to effectively address the challenges of narcotics transit before the establishment of the Manta base.

Drug trafficking in Ecuador during U.S. air base operations. During the period of U.S. military operations at the FOL in Manta, Ecuador experienced both benefits and challenges as a narcotics transit route. U.S. forces significantly bolstered Ecuador's capabilities in counternarcotics operations through enhanced surveillance, intelligence sharing, and training for local law enforcement. The deployment of advanced military assets such as reconnaissance aircraft allowed for improved monitoring of drug trafficking routes and facilitated the interception of narcotics shipments.²⁰ This collaboration helped to strengthen Ecuador's institutional capacity to combat organized crime and

provided a framework for regional cooperation in addressing transnational drug trafficking.

Despite these benefits, Ecuador continued to face significant challenges as a narcotics transit route. While U.S. support improved operational effectiveness, it could not eliminate the entrenched networks of organized crime that exploited Ecuador's vulnerabilities. Moreover, the sustained focus on counternarcotics operations often overshadowed the need for comprehensive socioeconomic strategies to tackle poverty, unemployment, and drug addiction in Ecuador.²¹ As a result, while the U.S. base at Manta provided valuable resources and support, the complexities of the narcotics trade and the sociopolitical landscape in Ecuador demanded a multifaceted approach to effectively tackling these enduring challenges.

After the U.S. air base closure: Reduction in U.S. surveillance capabilities and resurgence of drug trafficking activities due to diminished presence. The 2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report underscores Ecuador's position as a significant transit country for narcotics, particularly cocaine and heroin originating from Colombia and Peru.²² Although Ecuador is not a major drug producer, it encounters numerous challenges to countering drug trafficking including weak institutions, porous borders, and widespread corruption. The Ecuadorian government has made strides in its counternarcotics efforts, evidenced by notable arrests and the implementation of a new criminal code that decriminalizes personal drug use while imposing stricter penalties for trafficking.²³ Despite these efforts, sophisticated drug trafficking methods persist, often utilizing containerized cargo and maritime routes. There is an urgent need for enhanced coordination and support to address the escalating drug issues in Ecuador. The complexities of the narcotics trade and



(Figure from Insight Crime)

Figure 1. Ecuador International Drug Trafficking Routes

the necessity for comprehensive strategies require both enforcement and public health considerations.

The Need for a U.S. Air Base in Ecuador: Drug Trafficking Routes

Ecuador's geographical location positions it as a critical transit point for drug trafficking, with established international routes extending across land and sea (see figure 1).

The Port of Guayaquil serves as a central maritime hub, facilitating the shipment of significant quantities of cocaine concealed within legitimate cargo such as bananas. Ecuador's borders, especially with Colombia,

further complicate enforcement efforts, allowing for the overland movement of drugs through clandestine trails (see figure 2). Additionally, the presence of transnational criminal organizations, including Mexican cartels, has solidified Ecuador's status as a central drug trafficking hub, with traffickers using various methods for transportation including container ships, fishing boats, and private aircraft.²⁴ As the situation evolves, it is essential to recognize that drug trafficking routes and tactics are dynamic, adapting in response to law enforcement actions and interventions.

A Fragile Security Cooperation Partnership Between the United States and Latin America

The talks of a possible closure of Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras pose significant disadvantages for the United States and the broader Central and South American region, with implications extending beyond mere military logistics. In November 2024, Honduras President Xiomara Castro shared that she was reconsidering military cooperation with the United States as a response to the U.S. mass deportation plan.²⁵ The U.S. Air Base of Soto Cano serves as a strategic critical hub for U.S. operations in a region plagued by transnational drug trafficking and crime. The base enables rapid deployment capabilities, facilitating timely responses to natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and security challenges. Its closure would likely result in diminished U.S. influence and operational effectiveness in counter-narcotics efforts and regional stabilization initiatives,



(Figure from Insight Crime)

Figure 2. Ecuador Drug Trafficking and Routes

exacerbating security vulnerabilities. Economically, the base contributes substantially to the local economy, providing employment and supporting local businesses; its closure could lead to job losses and economic decline in surrounding communities, further destabilizing an already fragile economic landscape.

Politically, the withdrawal of the military presence may weaken U.S. partnerships and alliances with Central American countries, diminishing cooperative efforts to address shared challenges such as migration and violence. As regional instability grows, migration numbers to the United States may increase, compounding existing challenges at the southern border. Thus, the possible closure of Soto Cano Air Base could represent a military setback and a multifaceted challenge that could destabilize the region and undermine

U.S. interests.²⁶ This situation demands a careful reassessment of U.S. engagement strategies in Central America to address the interconnected security, economic, and political issues that would arise from the base's closure.

The Threats of China or Russia Establishing a Military Presence in Ecuador

Establishment of a Chinese or Russian military base in Ecuador presents significant geopolitical and security challenges for the United States and the broader Latin American region. Such a development would mark a strategic shift, enabling China or Russia to project power in the Western Hemisphere, traditionally considered within the U.S. sphere of influence.²⁷ This could alter the regional balance of power, potentially undermining U.S. influence and prompting a reevaluation of American military and diplomatic strategies.

The potential for increased surveillance and intelligence-gathering capabilities from such a Chinese or Russian base would also pose a direct national security threat to the United States. A possible approach is that China expands its influence in Ecuador with infrastructure projects while Russia attempts to do so with a military presence.²⁸ The proximity of such a base to the Panama Canal, a critical global maritime chokepoint, would raise concerns about the security of trade routes and the potential for disruption in the event of heightened tensions. The United States must enhance its diplomatic engagement and strengthen security partnerships with Latin American nations to address these threats, promote regional stability, and counter external influences.

China: Investment/Leasing Agreements in Ecuador

China's engagement in Ecuador is characterized by a multifaceted approach encompassing trade, investment, and financing, which has significantly impacted the country's ports and infrastructure. The recent free trade agreement between China and Ecuador has solidified their economic relationship, likely increased bilateral trade and enhanced port activities. Chinese corporations participate in multiple infrastructure projects, often funded through loans with stipulations requiring the use of Chinese firms.²⁹ This raises concerns about

potential debt traps and the long-term implications of such investments. Additionally, there are apprehensions regarding the environmental impacts of these projects and the growing Chinese presence in Ecuador, which has elicited concern from the United States regarding China's influence in the region. Although explicit leasing agreements can be complex to identify, it is evident that China's involvement in Ecuadorian infrastructure is strengthening its logistical capabilities, thereby expanding its influence in Ecuador's ports and related sectors.

China Agreement with Argentina

The situation surrounding the Chinese deep space station in Neuquén, Argentina, involves a complex agreement that has generated significant discussion and concern regarding its implications. Officially established during Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's presidency, the agreement entails a fifty-year lease of approximately two hundred hectares to China, allowing the operation of a facility to support satellite tracking and control for China's space exploration activities.³⁰ However, the agreement has raised alarms due to its lack of transparency, particularly regarding the level of control granted to China, which limits Argentine oversight and access to the site. Concerns have emerged about the potential dual use of the facility for military purposes despite assurances of its civilian intent; the fact that the Chinese entity managing the station reports to the People's Liberation Army further intensifies worries about Argentine sovereignty and regional security.³¹ The agreement includes provisions for tax exemptions for Chinese operators. It highlights the challenges of effective oversight and positions the deep space station as a focal point of regional geopolitical tension.

Conclusion

In 1942, the United States and Ecuador agreed to have a U.S. naval base in the Galapagos Islands due to their strategic importance during World War II.³² The purpose of Base Beta, "The Rock," was to extend U.S. reach and influence in the region, robustly counterbalancing increasing threats of German or Japanese attacks. The same could be used to counteract nontraditional powers like China and Russia.

A U.S. air base in Ecuador presents a significant strategic opportunity that could grant greater access

through a permanent presence to conduct counter-narcotics operations and promote regional stability. Geographically positioned along the Pacific coast, Ecuador's location is vital to critical maritime and aerial routes, enhancing U.S. rapid-response capabilities to address regional security challenges such as drug trafficking, organized crime, and humanitarian crises. Like the U.S. military presence in Manta from 1999 to 2009, a new or renewed, more extended agreement will facilitate enhanced surveillance, intelligence gathering, and combined military exercises, ultimately fostering closer diplomatic ties and mutual benefits, including economic assistance and military training for Ecuador.

On the other hand, a foreign military base by a nation like China or Russia in Ecuador poses substantial

geopolitical threats, fundamentally altering power dynamics in the Western Hemisphere. Such a development could diminish U.S. influence and undermine regional stability, particularly given the proximity of these locations to vital global trade routes like the Panama Canal. Creating a new U.S. air or naval base would address these concerns while mitigating security vulnerabilities in the region, reinforcing Ecuador's capacity to respond to emerging threats. The historical precedent of U.S. military operations at Eloy Alfaro Air Base underscores international military collaboration's complexities and significant benefits. Today, a similar initiative could enhance security cooperation, counter transnational crime, and promote regional stability, advancing U.S. and Ecuadorian strategic interests in a rapidly evolving security landscape. ■

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